Star SPORT
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DHAKA SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 27, 2020, *ASHWIN 12, 1427 BS*

WHAT TO WATCH

FACEBOOK LIVE
La Liga
Osasuna v Levante
Live from 4:00pm
Eibar v Athletic Club
Live from 6:00pm
Atletico Madrid v Granada
Live from 8:00pm
Cadiz v Sevilla
Live from 10:30pm
Real Valladolid v Celta Vigo
Live from 10:30pm
Barcelona v Villarreal
Live from 1:00am (Monday)
STAR SPORTS SELECT 1
Indian Premier League
Rajasthan v Punjab
Live from 8:00pm
STAR SPORTS SELECT 2
English Premier League
Sheffield Utd v Leeds
Live from 5:00pm
Tottenham v Newcastle
Live from 7:00pm
Man City v Leicester
Live from 9:30pm
West Ham v Wolves
Live from 12:00am (Monday)
TEN 2 SERIE A
Spezia v Sassuolo
Live from 4:30pm
Napoli v Genoa
Live from 7:00pm
Crotone v AC Milan
Live from 10:00pm
AS Roma v Juventus
Live from 12:45am (Monday)
STAR SPORTS 2
French Open
Live from 3:00pm

National cricketers enjoy practice as usual while BCB director Akram Khan, selectors Minhajul Abedin and Habibul Bashar, former captain Khaled Masud and BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury also enjoy viewing the player's practice from upstairs in Mirpur yesterday. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Tigers get three-day break as BCB assesses future

SPORTS REPORTER

Although the long and anxious wait to find out the fate of the Tigers' upcoming tour of Sri Lanka is still in the same uncertain state, it is almost certain that the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) will come to a decision in the coming days.

Upon completion of a week-long training schedule at their bio-secure residential camp, Bangladesh's 27-member preliminary squad were given a three-day break yesterday.

The Tigers were originally scheduled to travel to the island nation today, but the tour has been delayed as the BCB are yet to receive the health protocols from Sri Lanka Cricket.

"We were supposed to leave for Sri Lanka tomorrow but we are not being able to do so. Head coach [Russel Domingo], selectors and BCB CEO [Nizamuddin Chowdhury] sat for a meeting and decided to give a three-day break to the players. We will return to training after three days and we hope that we will get a response from the SLC in two-three days," said BCB's cricket operation head Akram Khan yesterday.

The BCB appear hopeful and are now planning to travel to Sri Lanka between October 7 and 10, although the revised health protocols will arrive after SLC officials receive guidance from the country's Covid-19 task force.

"If everything remains positive, we hope to go on the tour sometime between the 7th and 10th of the next month. Since the Lanka Premier League (LPL) has also been delayed, they have time," Akram added.

The former Bangladesh captain also informed that the BCB was moving forward according to plan and that even if the tour eventually got cancelled, the board would focus on domestic cricket.

Akram was asked whether the board would look for a new batting consultant after Craig McMillan decided not to join the Tigers for the Sri Lanka tour, but he replied that the BCB were concentrating more on the tour for the moment.

There were concerns that the three-day break would make it tougher to re-create a bio-secure bubble as the players were being allowed to return to their families, but BCB's chief physician Debashish Chowdhury allayed them.

"The cricketers have been allowed to go home for this break. This of course means the bubble will pop. However, depending on the decision due in a couple of days, we can make the cricketers regroup again and create a bubble. The process will be similar to what it has been so far," said Debashish.

"We have to do a fresh testing for Covid-19," he said, adding that they did not complete the last Covid-19 test that was expected to be completed 72 hours before their departure. When queried on the length of the new bubble, Debashish said: "It will depend on the guidelines from SLC."

No surprises in store for Barcelona

SAMAMA RAHMAN

Barcelona fans would have imagined this season as a fresh start after ending a dismal campaign with an 8-2 hammering to Bayern Munich. Instead, things have gotten progressively worse over the past 44 days and came to a head on the eve of their La Liga opener at home to Villarreal tonight.

Lionel Messi blasted the board again on Friday in an Instagram post after Luis Suarez's departure, saying that nothing about them surprised him anymore. Other former player such as Samuel Eto'o, Daniel Alves and Cesc Fabregas also commented, with Neymar adding: "[It's] Incredible how they do things".

Messi's reaction to his close friend's exit is no surprise. That he was upset about it being a possibility had also made headlines. But the fact that he made his discontent so public showed that he had no desire to continue the facade. After years of being the perfect ambassador, the Argentine again aired the displeasure which stems from the board challenging him to take the club to court if he were to have his way and leave.

For his part, Bartomeu has repeatedly praised himself for keeping hold of Messi, while also saying: "Messi guarantees success". That claim may be hyperbolic, but in the sense of attracting fans and, in turn, sponsors, it is fact.

The 33-year-old has attempted to get things right on the field at least, having participated in training and the pre-season friendlies. His shaking hands with Koeman after a friendly was seen around Spain as a sign that the duo had buried the hatchet after an awkward first meeting.

Although more signings will be needed to replace outgoing and ageing players, Phillipe Coutinho's return after an encouraging campaign at Bayern and Ousmane Dembele's from injury will be welcome. Miralem Pjanic, who arrived from Juventus, said Barcelona would be eager to show the world that loss to Bayern was "an accident".

Fans will also be eager to see how Ansu Fati -- who had a 400-million-euro buyout clause inserted into his contract -- performs. It is also likely that Antoine Griezmann will be more involved by playing in his preferred position down the middle, replacing Suarez.

Yet, there are those that believe Koeman lost the plot when he decided Riqui Puig was expendable. The 21-year-old, who impressed last season, decided to stay and fight for his place in the first team and was registered with Barcelona B recently.

While that storm swirls, Bartomeu is stalling a second vote on a motion of censure against him. The club are insisting that the identity of each person who signed the initial petition be verified twice. First, through a phone call and then by letting a graphologist examine the signatures on the petition.

The club's board of directors reportedly suspect that as many as 5,000 of the 20,687 signatures are forgeries, according to COPE. If that does turn out to be the case, then the number of signatures would fall below the 16,00-odd votes required to force a second phase of voting. That verification process will begin on September 29.

There are somewhat darker rumours that Bartomeu is acting out of self-interest, keeping in mind the board is liable for a portion of the losses that the club suffers. Selling Suarez, Vidal, Rakitic and Nelson Semedo will reportedly save 52 million euros each season on salaries alone, and go a long way towards curbing Barcelona's inflated wage structure.

When Messi finally broke his silence and decided to stay at Barcelona, he said that he had become disillusioned by the direction of the club. He felt that they were not making the kind of effort that was needed to stay competitive. In the time since, they have done nothing to put their most valuable player, whose contract expires at the end of the season, at ease.

They have not made changes that their best player feels will help them, but they expect him to live up to his 'guarantee' of success. Given his reputation, it would not be entirely surprising if he did.

The international season of cricket in Australia got underway at Brisbane's Allan Border Field yesterday with a three-match series between Australia and New Zealand women's teams. The home side clinched a 17-run win over New Zealand in the first T20I. Both teams formed a barefoot circle to connect to the country ahead of the toss in a major public display of solidarity with the nation's Aboriginal community prior to the first international sporting fixture on home soil since the Black Lives Matter movement came to forefront earlier this year.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Indonesian GM wins title

SPORTS REPORTER

Indonesian Grandmaster Susanto Megaranto won the title of Joytu Sheikh Hasina International Online Chess Tournament, which concluded yesterday.

The 2517-rated GM, who led the table since the opening round -- either solo or joint – beat Indian GM SL Narayanan and Iranian GM Amin Tabatabei in Buchholtz tiebreak system after all three of them finished on seven points each from nine rounds.

SL Narayanan settled for the second position while Tabatabei finished third.

Five players finished on 6.5 points each while six players, including Bangladesh's FM Subrato Biswas, FM Mohammad Javed and IM Abu Sufian finished on six points. They were accommodated separate positions on the basis of tie-break, with Subrato finishing 12th, Javed on 14th and Sufian 15th.

GM Surya Sekhar Ganguly of India, the highest rated player in this tournament with a rating point of 2646, finished 10th. Bangladesh's highest-rated player, GM Ziaur Rahman, finished in 22nd position with five points.

A total of 74 players took part in the nine-round online event which was held to mark the 74th birthday of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

'Weird to stay in the hotel'

REUTERS

Serena Williams finds it 'weird' having to stay in a hotel during the French Open despite owning an apartment in Paris as she continues her chase of a record-equalling 24th Grand Slam title.

As part of the Covid-19 protocols, the French Open organisers have told all participants to stay in two designated hotels.

"It's definitely weird. This has always been my home away from home. I always loved being here," Williams told reporters on Saturday. "It has been really different for me staying at a hotel when I'm like, 'Oh, this is what we normally do'. I guess it's a must."

Former national captain and star striker Alfaz Ahmed runs with the ball during a friendly football match between Bogura Sonali Otit Football Club and Sonali Otit Football Club, Mirpur in front of around 3,000 spectators at the Alhaz Momtaz Uddin Stadium in Bogura on Friday. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Stars steady themselves as battle in Paris commences

Novak Djokovic

Simona Halep

Rafael Nadal

Dominic Thiem

Serena Williams

Victoria Azarenka

AGENCIES

Four months after it was originally scheduled to take place, Roland Garros will now host the final Grand Slam of the season from today.

The clay-court event features more of the top players than the US Open, but it remains notable for who isn't playing -- Roger Federer is still sidelined as he recovers from surgery on his right knee, and world No. 1 and reigning champion Ashleigh Barty, No. 3 and 2020 US Open champion Naomi Osaka and No. 7 and 2019 US Open champion Bianca Andreescu are all missing the event due to concerns related to the coronavirus pandemic and lack of preparation time.

Still, this event is not lacking in star power. Rafael Nadal, a 12-time champion in Paris, makes his return after missing the U.S. swing, as does 2018 champion and top women's seed Simona Halep.

Novak Djokovic will look to redeem himself after a controversial early exit in New York, and Serena Williams will continue her quest for Grand Slam title number 24 after falling in the semifinals at the US Open. Players such as newly crowned major champion Dominic Thiem, US Open finalists Alexander Zverev and Victoria Azarenka, and surging American Jennifer Brady will look to bring their hot streaks to another continent. Supporting Nadal, Dominic Thiem also voiced his opinion regarding the slow pace of the Wilson ball as the Austrian, who recently won the US Open 2020, said that it will be challenging to play in the French Open 2020.

King of clay Nadal expressed his disappointment even before the tournament commenced. The Babolat balls have been replaced by the slower Wilson ones.

"I practiced for two days at home with the ball. Now, of course, here. As I said, I'm a little bit sad because the Babolat at Roland Garros, it was my favorite ball, it was perfect," Thiem said. "Obviously, it was the ball from my racquet company. Was fast, was taking the spin incredibly well. But the Wilson ball is good as well. It's just a little bit slower. It gets a little bit bigger after a while. In general, the conditions are going to be slower. It can be rainy, it can be very cold. So we will see," he added.

Andy Murray said a delay in receiving his COVID-19 test result on his return to Britain made him wait to seek treatment for a pelvic issue, but he was fit ahead of the French Open.

HIGHLIGHT

The French Open starts on Sunday with an ever-shrinking number of spectators allowed at Roland Garros, the players facing tight restrictions and bad weather threatening to wreak havoc during the fortnight. Organisers were hoping to welcome up to 20,000 fans a day into the grounds but that number was reduced to 11,500, then 5,000 and eventually 1,000 as the French government intervened amid a resurgence of COVID-19 cases in the country.

FRENCH OPEN 2020

Edition: 124
Schedule: September 27 -- October 11
Venue: Stade Rolland Garros (Paris)
Surface: Clay
Prize money: €38,000,000
Defending champion: Men's: Rafael Nadal, **Women's:** Ashleigh Barty
Top seed: Men's: Novak Djokovic, **Women's:** Simona Halep
Most singles titles: Men's: Rafael Nadal (12), **Women's:** Chris Evert (7)

'The point is to score'

REUTERS

Manchester United beat Brighton & Hove Albion 3-2 away in the Premier League on Saturday after an incredible finale in which Bruno Fernandes struck the winning goal from the penalty spot in the 100th minute of the game.

Fernandes's winner, which came after referee Chris Kavanagh had initially blown for fulltime, concluded an enthralling match which saw Brighton hit the woodwork five times and have a penalty overturned by VAR, while United had a goal ruled out in each half for offside.

Kavanagh eventually gave the 97th-minute penalty after consulting the pitchside VAR monitor and Fernandes lashed into the net from the spot, moments after Solly March had levelled for Brighton in the fifth minute of added time.

United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer was happy to admit his side had ridden their luck.

"We got away with one. Maybe one point we deserved, we didn't deserve more. But the character deserved more," he told reporters. "Last season we had too many draws, so that is a big plus for us."

United's match winner Fernandes made no apologies. "Maybe they deserved more, but the point is score goals not hit the bar. Sometimes you have to have some luck."